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Working Paper No. 1

Character Education: Research Prospects and Problems

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"character"; (3) whether or not character education constitutes
indoctrination; (4) the research problems involved in identifying and
testing hypotheses about various school influences on the development of
character; (5) the possible political interests that may be served by
attempts to teach character; and (6) the role of religion in character
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these complex and sensitive issues are unclear.

Character Education: Research Prospects and Problems

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U.S. Department of Education

April 1988

Office of Research
Working Paper No. 1

Character
Education:
Research
Prospects
and
Problems

For Richard
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Office of Educational Research
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Abstract

This paper reviews the issues and research problems associated with that form of moral education in which good character is central. It consists of six sections, which discuss: (1) why character is considered valuable; (2) what the advocates of character education mean by the term "character"; (3) whether or not character education constitutes indoctrination; (4) the research problems involved in identifying and testing hypotheses about various school influences on the development of character; (5) the possible political interests that may be served by attempts to teach character; and (6) the role of religion in character education and questions that arise concerning American public schools and the religion clauses of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The discussion suggests that the questions regarding these complex and sensitive issues are unavoidable, and that the answers are unclear.

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Abstract

This paper reviews the issues and research problems associated with that form of moral education in which good character is central. It consists of six sections: (1) why character is considered valuable; (2) what the advocates of character education mean by the term "character"; (3) whether or not character education constitutes indoctrination; (4) the research problems involved in identifying and testing hypotheses about various school influences on the development of character; (5) the possible political interests that may be served by attempts to teach character; and (6) the role of religion in character education and questions that arise concerning American public schools and the religious clauses of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The discussion suggests that the questions regarding these complex and sensitive issues are unavoidable, and that the answers are uncertain.

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Character education in the schools has long been a controversial topic, particularly in light of the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. The focus of this report is on the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. The report is organized into six sections. Section I, "The Attractiveness of Character," discusses the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. Section II, "What is Good Character, Precisely?," discusses the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. Section III, "Indoctrination or Not?," discusses the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. Section IV, "(Re)Searching for What Works," discusses the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. Section V, "Politics and Education: Raising Class Consciousness?," discusses the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. Section VI, "Religion, Toleration, and Relativism," discusses the current debate about the status and value of moral education in American schools. The report concludes with a list of references and acknowledgments.

The attraction of character education lies in its intuitive appeal and in the promise of morally desirable results. Adults opinion polls repeatedly report a continuing approval for the teaching of standards of right and wrong in the public schools as part of children's education (Gallup September 1994; September 1995). Values clarification and moral development have received considerable criticism for taking a

*The term "character" is used throughout this document to refer to any form of instruction or schooling that aims to influence the formation of character and is not limited to the curriculum program distributed by the American Institute for Character Education.

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Character Education: Research Prospects and Problems

Character education* attracts considerable attention in the ongoing debate about the status and aims of moral education in America. The proposal to promote in schools educational practices that engender good character in students meets with approval and suspicion from concerned parents, teachers, school officials, social commentators, lawyers, judges, politicians, and educational theorists and researchers. People approve of the proposal on grounds that it is necessary to a complete education, may be linked to better academic achievement, and can promote the well-being of society in numerous ways. At the same time, even its proponents are suspicious of our ability to ascertain which educational strategies effectively cultivate character, and about possible biases in the moral values attached to the notion of character itself. Some worry that children will be subjected to indoctrination, many are concerned about how the learning of character will be implemented in the schools, and almost everyone is interested in the political implications, especially with respect to the role of religion in the public schools. The entire range of issues in this area deserves further attention and research, as indicated by the following discussion.

I. The Attractiveness of Character

Moral education in the schools possesses great appeal, particularly moral education aimed at the formation of character. The focus of character education differs in at least two respects from both forms of moral education that have dominated the American educational scene in the recent past, namely, values clarification and Kohlberg's moral development approach. First, character education typically endorses a specific content to be learned, a set of qualities and moral virtues (e.g., honesty, courage, kindness), while the other two approaches set aside such definite commitment, emphasizing instead the process of moral reasoning and value selection. And second, character education concentrates directly on behavior that reflects the acceptance of the relevant values, and emphasizes the motivational, relatively stable aspects of personality that direct an individual's actions. The other two approaches are certainly concerned about conduct, but their primary focus is intellectual, attending to the kind of belief formation and justification used in moral decisionmaking.

The attraction of character education lies in its intrinsic appeal and in the promise of socially desirable results. Public opinion polls repeatedly report overwhelming approval for the teaching of standards of right and wrong in the public schools as part of children's education (Gallup September 1984; September 1980). Values clarification and moral development have received considerable criticism for taking a

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relativistic posture of rejecting the possibility of a rational, objective appraisal of the legitimacy of positive moral claims (Baer 1977; 1982; Hoff-Sommers 1984; Lockwood 1975; Ryan 1986.) This means that they cannot give unqualified support to the content of any particular set of moral standards. Character education, on the other hand, implies that certain specific moral claims are indeed genuine, and that teachers can therefore judge and point out whether a given moral belief is right or wrong. Acquiring this moral knowledge is simply considered a legitimate part of a complete education, as being essential to the right conduct of a meaningful life.

Beyond that, character education offers the prospect of producing other beneficial social consequences. Researchers are finding evidence to support the claim that improving elements of character is associated with better academic performance. Research studies indicate that students who are self-disciplined (Etzioni 1984), or who identify themselves with traditional values, namely, "religiosity," "hard work," and the "value of learning" (Ginsburg and Hanson 1986) tend to score higher on achievement tests than students who do not identify with these qualities. This suggests that the cultivation of character not only produces students who are morally superior but may also improve the development of their academic skills.

The relationship between improving character and academic achievement appears to run in the other direction as well. Classroom strategies designed to improve educational achievement also tend to generate such positive child behavior as independence, task persistence, cooperation, and question-asking (Stallings 1978). All of these traits may be relevant to character.

And some researchers argue that evaluating students' moral character in school would be beneficial in yet another respect (Kagan 1981; Wynne and Walberg 1985). That is, making good character a recognized educational standard introduces a noncompetitive goal for students to aim at, a goal that is within the reach of many more students than academic excellence. Consequently, according to Kagan, more students will have a good chance to succeed by this standard, resulting in less student alienation from school.

Proponents of character education further assert that improving the character of American youth would help reverse the rise of a variety of social problems, e.g., drug abuse, suicide, homicide, and out-of-wedlock births (Wilson 1985; Wynne and Walberg, eds. 1984; Wynne 1985). Out of school, as well as in, character education should improve social well-being through its effect on these problems.

All of these arguments imply that character education is valuable, for its own sake and for its many consequences. But the same central features that make it so attractive are also sources of controversy. The values espoused, and the way they are absorbed by students so as to precipitate action, are topics of lively debate.

II. What is Good Character, Precisely?

In the first place, there is some question about the meaning of the term "character," in this context. It certainly refers to a complex set of relatively persistent qualities of the individual person, and the term has a definite positive connotation when it is used in discussions of moral education. But beyond that, it is difficult to determine precisely what people mean by it. As a result of this vagueness, the views of advocates of programs in which the concept of character is central receive criticism which they may or may not deserve. It is crucial to the argument for such programs that character is something of discernible value that meets with widespread acceptance. Is it so?

For purposes of illustration, consider the following descriptions of character. Keep in mind that accounts of character in the literature commonly offer lists of attributes that their authors expressly leave incomplete, and often explain only sketchily, if at all. These are all descriptions by important figures in the field:

American Institute for Character Education (AICE): "Courage, conviction, generosity, kindness, helpfulness, honesty, honor, justice, tolerance, the sound use of time and talent, freedom of choice, freedom of speech, good citizenship, the right to be an individual, and the right of equal opportunity." (Goble and Brooks 1983, p. 46)

Bennett: "Strength of mind, individuality, independence, moral quality, ... thoughtfulness, fidelity, kindness, diligence, honesty, fairness, self-discipline, respect for law, and taking one's guidance by accepted and tested standards of right and wrong rather than by, for example, one's personal preference." (1986b, p. 2)

Maryland's Values Education Commission's "Character Objectives": "1. Personal integrity and honesty rooted in respect for the truth, intellectual curiosity, and love of learning. 2. A sense of duty to self, family, school, and community. 3. Self-esteem rooted in the recognition of one's potential. 4. Respect for the rights of all persons regardless of their race, religion, sex, age, physical condition, or mental state. 5. A recognition of the right of others to hold and express differing views, combined with the capacity to make discriminating judgements among competing opinions. 6. A sense of justice, rectitude, fair play and a commitment to them. 7. A disposition of understanding, sympathy, concern, and compassion for others. 8. A sense of discipline and pride in one's work; respect for the achievements of others. 9. Respect for one's property and the property of others, including public property. 10. Courage to express one's convictions." (1979)

Wynne: "Tact, honesty, obedience to legitimate authority, perseverance, good humor, loyalty." (1985, p. 4)

(Note: The Values Education Commission identifies a separate, but

overlapping, set of "Citizenship Objectives." Wynne's and Bennett's lists are expressly incomplete.)

Now ask the following three sets of questions:

(1) Do the above authorities agree on the fundamental elements of character? Are there substantial differences, or even conflicts, among their views, or are the differences relatively trivial? Wynne includes "good humor," unlike the others, while they each mention qualities he does not. Critics charge that Wynne's claim that there exists an accepted common tradition of American values is false (Lockwood 1985), as is the AICE's claim of universal agreement on the values they list. Even if they all used the same words, it would still be necessary to ask whether they all mean exactly the same thing by them. Does "honesty" only involve no lying or cheating, or does it also require volunteering the truth when the situation calls for it? And should people be honest no matter what the consequences? Does Wynne's "obedience to legitimate authority" allow for justified civil disobedience, while Bennett's "respect for law" precludes it? Is "justice" the same as "fairness"? In moral philosophy, this last question involves the sort of claim that requires argumentative support (Rawls 1958), as do most of the other questions mentioned.

Until such questions are answered, it remains unclear whether there is consensus about these values or not. A moderate position holds that there is a common core of values shared by a plurality of perspectives, as when Grant points out that accepting the value of rational moral discussion presupposes agreement on certain basic values, e.g., respect for truth, honesty, fairness, order, etc. (Grant 1981; 1985; see also Peters 1973). Of course, this common core view is also unconfirmed, again because no one has worked out the precise meaning of the values alleged to constitute the common core.

(2) What about conflicts between accepted values? Generally, the elements of character endorsed by character education advocates are either simply listed or else explained separately. How do they propose to resolve conflicts arising from the application of two or more values relevant to a given situation? What does Bennett recommend when being fair is also unkind? How does Wynne resolve conflicts between honesty and loyalty? What should Marylanders do when the duty to family clashes with a duty to the community? How does the AICE respond when good citizenship contends with the right to be an individual? Obviously these values do not always oppose one another, but they do conflict often enough to produce serious dilemmas.

(3) On the other hand, do positive relations between values generate difficulties for character education? If a moral perspective involves not just one value but a coherent system of values, along with a justification of that system, then can the meaning of a particular value be understood without reference to its place within the whole (Baer, 1986)? If this is so, then the establishment of a common core must involve the analysis of entire moral theories, not just particular values considered in isolation from each other. Since some of the moral

theories are inextricably tied to a religious component, this implies that in those theories the concept of character will possess religious qualities. And in light of the theological dimension of the justification of some moral perspectives, it would then appear that a society committed to the toleration of different religions faces serious questions about the possibility of constructing a common ideal of character, depending on the degree of consensus among the religions practiced. (See section VI.)

This is not to say that these questions identify problems unique to character education. Indeed, they represent stock questions posed in moral philosophy regarding cases that are problematic for almost any moral theory. And it may be inappropriate and unrealistic to demand that character education advocates provide definitive solutions to all of them. It is arguable that the purpose of efforts to encourage the formation of character is to provide only the basic orientation of a proper moral perspective, not sophisticated responses to the persistently vexing questions of moral philosophy. On this view, character education might identify certain cardinal virtues, offer certain fundamental ideas about how those virtues fit together into a general perspective, and give an appropriate explanation of why the exercise of those virtues is imperative, but stop well short of a sophisticated elaboration of the entire underlying philosophical view. But in any case, in the interest of clarity, it would be an advance to identify more precisely what the existing forms of character education aim to achieve and what is simply outside of their purpose, so that proponents and critics alike can have realistic expectations regarding the promise of such programs and an understanding of what remains to be done.

III. Indoctrination or Not?

The second major area of controversy surrounding character education involves the frequent allegation that such an approach indoctrinates students. Much discussion concerns the question of whether the learner is forced to adopt a particular moral outlook through the use of essentially nonrational means of inculcating values, with the result that such an outlook is adopted uncritically (Bennett and Sher 1982; Laura 1983; Paske 1985; Peter's 1973; Brandt 1985). The subject is conditioned to behave in specific ways without a clear and self-conscious understanding of why he or she should act that way, it is claimed, with the result that the subject is neither truly educated nor truly moral in his or her activity. Indoctrination implies that the subject is not responsible for his or her own beliefs, since he or she was denied the option of choosing to accept or reject them. Because the notion of responsibility is usually taken to be a central attribute of character, the charge of indoctrination is a serious one.

The central features of character education already mentioned make it especially vulnerable to criticisms concerning indoctrination. Because it straightforwardly endorses a specific set of values, and because of its emphasis on behavior, character education cannot claim to be impartial or neutral with respect to the values it embraces, and must

recognize the possibility of people's doing the right thing for the wrong reason, or for no reason at all. Character itself, the vehicle of this approach, is not an entirely rational intellectual entity, and its formation does predispose its possessor toward particular attitudes and actions. Character education certainly does encourage the subject to believe in and act on a specified set of values.

In comparison, values clarification and moral development do not pose such an obvious indoctrinative threat. They aim to avoid imposing specific moral claims on their learners, and focus on the intellectual process by which the individual arrives at an opinion. They are reminiscent of the Kantian tradition of moral thinking, in which it is crucial to the moral value of the agent's actions that they be determined by a freely made, autonomous, rational decision (Kant 1981). And there is plenty of support in educational circles for this tradition of moral education (Baron 1985; Peters 1966). Though Kant would reject the relativistic idea that sincerely held moral belief is sufficient to justify action, as values clarification asserts, and would be more sympathetic toward the moral development model in which moral claims are subjected to formal standards of evaluation, they all have in common a belief in the necessity for self-conscious, autonomous individual decisionmaking. And they all assert that the values of society at large may be called into question. Thus values clarification and moral development both appear to be models of moral education that minimize the threat of indoctrination.

The issues addressed in the previous section's discussion of the meaning of character are relevant here. The more controversial a particular moral value, the more vulnerable the program which endorses that value. Only values that enjoy widespread acceptance can inform the content of a moral education program safe from the charge of bias toward some particular segment of society to the unwarranted exclusion of others. On the other hand, of course, it is most difficult to critically appraise those values that are most popular, to safeguard individuals from the despotism of moral custom, which encourages people to accept values merely because everybody else does. Both of these concerns reflect the crucial need for a persuasive justification of whatever values are included in the concept of character.

Can character education deny the charge of indoctrination? The answer to this question depends on the way in which this form of moral education is carried out, and the precise understanding of indoctrination.

Certainly character is influenced by socialization processes over which the individual being socialized has no choice or control. Personality development occurs while the self participates in a series of interpersonal interactions systematically structured in a way that preserves the functioning of society or the particular institutions within it. And there is little doubt that the people who are involved in these interactions are frequently unaware of the ways in which those interactions shape the aims and expectations of the participants. In this sense, socialization inevitably serves as a kind of automatic

process of character development, in which the only autonomy the self has is what the socialization process induces in it for the sake of functional competence. And this socialization certainly includes the cultivation of value-laden behavior, as Gouldner points out in the cases of reciprocity and beneficence (1973a; 1973b).

But that is not what is really at issue, because indoctrination in the pejorative sense involves the notion of a deliberate attempt to inculcate beliefs, attitudes, and values into the student without providing a justification for them, leaving the student unable to assess them critically. Socialization is not indoctrination until it becomes deliberate, a conscious attempt to transmit contestable social values and at the same time withhold available instruction regarding the critical evaluation of the justification of those values.

This sense of indoctrination also obviously presupposes that the student has the capacity for learning how to criticize arguments. It is at least plausible to claim that young children are fully able to adopt values well before they are fully able to evaluate their legitimacy, a condition that denies this presupposition. It appears to be senseless to offer students instruction in critical evaluation that will do them no good.

At this stage, it is argued that it is still appropriate to instruct students regarding values, nevertheless. Peters, who supports this position, is quick to add that such instruction must occur with an eye toward the day when children mature to the point where their critical capacities become available, and so teachers must always seek to convey that their authority is merely provisional, i.e., subject to rational critical scrutiny, even before the students are actually capable of doing the scrutinizing (1966). But so long as they can eventually criticize and perhaps reject their previously acquired moral beliefs, he apparently sees no objection to their having had them.

Once students have developed the capacity for critical understanding, the indoctrination question depends on whether the teacher provides them with the means and the opportunity for exercising that capacity. Here it becomes important to determine what the teacher can offer the student by way of critical skills, alternative views, and justificatory arguments. Different theories of moral education imply different answers regarding what the teacher will provide.

Carr's categorization of theories of moral education into three approaches, along with the problems typical of those approaches, makes these differences clear (1983). On the "Adaptation Theory," which he associates with utilitarianism, conventional relativism, and the work of Durkheim and Barrow, moral education consists of the ways in which people are initiated into the moral ideology of the given culture. A primary problem for any adaptation theory of moral education is its ability to distinguish moral education from mere socialization, since it takes the legitimacy of the culture's moral ideology for granted. On the "Autonomy Theory," associated with Kant, prescriptivism, existentialism, and moral development, moral education concerns the development of the

individual's ability to decide moral questions freely and self-consciously. The main problems here, according to Carr, lie in the radically individualistic model of moral justification and the overemphasis on moral reasoning, rather than on conduct. The third theory Carr calls the "Virtue Theory," which he associates with the work of Aristotle, Foot, Geach, and Warnock. The virtue theory cultivates the moral outlook of students via role modeling and the guided practice of moral conduct. The two problems here, in Carr's view, are determining which virtues ought to be taught and securing teachers who possess the virtues that must be modelled for the students.

Clearly the adaptation theory model is most vulnerable to the charge of indoctrination, while the autonomy theory model appears most innocent. Adaptation to the norms and values of society simply does not require criticizing those norms and values, or entertaining alternatives. In Durkheim, for example, the proper aim of moral education is the collective interest of society, and moral knowledge supposedly provides the self with the autonomy to obey what is right. Durkheim admits that our understanding of morality is an expression of our historically developed social nature (1961). Thus society provides the goal, and the understanding of what ought to be, without necessarily supplying the basis for a critical appraisal of either.

The autonomy model looks much better to people aiming to avoid indoctrination: the emphasis on the decision of the independent individual is an explicit rejection of the propriety of indoctrination, and the fundamentally liberal understanding of human nature appears to provide the individual with potential resources with which to criticize society's norms. A liberal perspective assumes that a diversity of conceptions of the good, a morally informed concept of reason, and creative imagination can all offer independent standards for the critical evaluation of society's received moral opinions.

Closer inspection, however, suggests a potential problem. The autonomy model may offer nothing substantial to teach in the way of moral knowledge, in which case it may serve to effectively indoctrinate students taught in accordance with this model. If the teacher is so concerned to protect the student's autonomy that he or she offers no moral guidance at all, then the student will choose his or her values in an autonomous, but also uncritical and unjustified, manner. If the autonomy isn't what it pretends to be, if the resources presented as independent of social norms actually turn out to reflect those norms, it can be alleged that its teaching effectively serves to indoctrinate (Baer 1977). That is, if ostensibly autonomous decisions are actually determined by influences on the individual in the learning situation that go unacknowledged, then a program that pretends to encourage autonomous decisionmaking in fact constitutes an indirectly indoctrinative approach.

The virtue theory model best matches the theoretical framework for the elaboration of character education, because of the issue of which values or virtues should be included, because the role modeling approach of virtue theory reflects character education's behavioral emphasis, and

because the concept of character is normally explicated in terms of a constellation of virtues. Virtue theory is a complicated case with respect to allegations of indoctrination. On the positive side, note that the virtue theory includes moral knowledge, which implies a justification which an indoctrinated person does not possess, and freedom, which the indoctrinated person cannot exercise (Carr 1983). And it has been argued that having a reason to act (or a virtuous desire), and the understanding of action itself, also presuppose the free exercise of reason in the virtue model (O'Leary 1983).

Aristotle himself, the original philosophical theorist of this model of moral education, certainly affirms the crucial roles of both practical wisdom and choice in virtuous action. According to Aristotle, the entire subject of ethics, and the idea of responsibility in particular, presuppose that the agent could have done otherwise, and one of the other conditions of virtuous action is knowing what is chosen:

...in the case of the virtues an act is not performed justly or with self-control if the act itself is of a certain kind, but only if in addition the agent has certain characteristics as he performs it: first of all, he must know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose to act the way he does, and he must choose it for its own sake; and in the third place, the act must spring from a firm and unchangeable character. (1962; p. 39)

Both the element of choice and the requirement of self-conscious understanding make it difficult to argue that the truly virtuous person has been indoctrinated. That is, virtuous action takes place when the person understands why the action is good and chooses to do it. Indoctrination, on the other hand, presumes that the agent acts involuntarily, without a full understanding of the meaning of the action, or without full control over his or her own behavior.

At the same time, however, it is important to notice how the Aristotelian account of virtue and virtuous action predisposes the agent toward the adoption of a specific conception of the good. In Aristotle's view, a moral virtue is an attitude or disposition toward emotion that is cultivated through training, by doing the right thing. Only by engaging in the appropriate activity for a substantial period of time is the agent able to cultivate the desire for doing right and the faculty of judging what is right. This training typically begins early in childhood and results in a set of relatively fixed desires and attitudes, i.e., a firm character. The success of the legislators of the community, according to Aristotle, depends on their decisions regarding the cultivation of the proper character in the citizens (1962). Once formed, that character, be it virtuous or vicious, is extremely difficult to alter. Like throwing a rock, as Aristotle says, we can only control its direction at the outset.

This creates a kind of natural tradeoff between a liability toward bias and the practical insight that may be necessary to informed judgement or penetrating critique. If Aristotle's view of virtue is correct, the training a person gets will inevitably affect his or her

attitude toward the activity in question. But at the same time, that training provides the individual with the understanding of the activity which makes informed justification or a thorough critique of that activity possible. Scheffler makes the same point:

The moral point of view is attained, if at all, by acquiring a tradition of practice, embodied in rules and habits of conduct. Without a preliminary immersion in such a tradition, an appreciation of the import of its rules, obligations, rights, and demands, the concept of choice of actions and rules for oneself can hardly be achieved. Yet the prevalent tradition of practice can itself be taught in such a way as to encourage the ultimate attainment of a superordinate and comprehensive moral point of view. (1976 p. 28)

Given this picture of human character formation, the charge of indoctrination must be taken seriously. The agent must be committed to a training regimen before the age of rational maturity, and without the full appreciation for the goodness of the given activity that comes only with experience. According to Aristotle, legislators, parents, and friends are in some sense responsible for the individual's virtues, and can certainly provide a climate in which it is much easier to resist the attraction of false ideals. But even so, in Aristotle's view, this does not absolve the individual from his or her own share of responsibility for the development of his or her own character. The nature of human development requires this plural responsibility for a project that people are fated to engage in together.

Whether character education constitutes indoctrination or not depends on the specific content of the instruction, the particular manner in which it is presented, the theory on which it is modelled, and how strictly the notion of indoctrination is construed. It is safe to say that it is possible to employ a character program for the purposes of indoctrination, but not necessary. And it is important to notice that any approach to moral education has the potential to be used for purposes of indoctrination.

IV. (Re)Searching for What Works

Any interest in moral education in general or character education in particular must assume that such education can take place, that is, that specific educational strategies make some difference in the development of a person's character. No doubt people acquire character traits and values somehow, but precisely how this happens is quite unclear. The research problems that are associated with the investigation of character development and education pose serious difficulties for progress in our understanding of what works.

First, there are the standard problems typical of social science research. The design of any research strategy must always reflect assumptions about what the relevant observed variables might be, and statistical analyses must be wary of the risks of interpreting associations or correlations as causal factors. Such inferences are

more plausible in circumstances where one can change one variable and keep all other known variables constant, thus testing for the anticipated effect. But pragmatic and ethical constraints often make such manipulation of research subjects impractical, and this strategy assumes both that we are already aware of all of the relevant variables and that no distinct effects are created by the interaction of combined variables not reducible to their separate influences. And of course on moral issues especially there must be concern about the biases of researchers and subjects interfering undesirably with the design of studies and the interpretation of research results.

Second, character is an especially difficult phenomenon to investigate scientifically. Character probably takes a considerable period of time to develop, during which the subject is exposed to innumerable factors. Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, community figures, and media personalities are only some of the people likely to affect the individual, as well as genetic inheritance, family socioeconomic status, school and community organization, social climate, and the natural and technological resources of society at large. Research design would seem to dictate shortening the period of time for studies of character in order to keep the execution of the study more manageable. But since character itself is a fairly stable feature of human personality, it requires a long-term assessment of behavior in the mature as well as in the formative stages. And another imputed feature of character, namely, the way in which it makes the subject able to resist or ignore outside influences, means that studying character development involves trying to see how environmental influences foster the subject's becoming impervious to environmental influences.

The behavioral orientation of character education imposes further limitations on research strategies such as paper and pencil survey questionnaires: even if one could trust the subjects' testimony regarding their sincerely held beliefs, as long as the phenomenon of akrasia exists, i.e., of knowing what is right but voluntarily doing otherwise, even those who report the right moral convictions may fail to display good character. At the same time, moral action does require the intention to do the good, and thus the simple observation of someone's doing the right thing is also insufficient evidence of the possession of character.

Since character bears an immediate relationship to personality, one might be inclined to look to psychology for guidance on this subject. But the advice is far from being clearly helpful. Freudian theory locates a substantial part of character development in the workings of the unconscious at a fairly early age, and this is both difficult to study scientifically and to direct pedagogically. Behaviorism does not allow sufficiently for the role of intentions, desires, and beliefs in the scientific understanding of human actions, and employs a causal model that appears to preclude genuine moral responsibility, which is a central feature of character as it is understood here. Humanistic psychology appears to deny that the teacher can provide any positive moral guidance to the natural development of the child. Sartre's phenomenological ontology makes character a matter of arbitrary choice.

And the work of Piaget and Kohlberg in cognitive moral development is seen as devoting insufficient attention to the affective elements of the psyche on which character relies (Peters 1973). Carr sees the formulation of an adequate philosophical psychology as the primary condition for significant improvement in educational theory, and as the source of root conflicts between traditional and progressive schools of educational thought (1984a; 1984b). Adelson laments the absence of attention to psychological theories concerned with stable structures of personality (1986). In recognition of the acknowledged absence of a theoretically plausible, practically-relevant theory of moral psychology, one hesitates before dismissing the claim that psychology has yet to advance to the status of a science in the traditional sense (Finkelman 1978). There is a good bit of research on relations between isolated facets of the environment and the individual's thought and action, but this research has not been brought together to form a coherent theory powerful enough to generate a substantial research program.

The features in the social environment that are supposed to influence character present equally challenging problems and puzzlements for sociologists and educational researchers. Special programs, revised approaches to ordinary curriculum subject areas, and certain aspects of the process and organization of regular schooling all pretend to influence students' moral behavior and attitudes. Whether they do or not is debatable.

Considerable attention has been paid to the development of programs specifically oriented toward the moral education of character. For example, some form of character education is required of every public school in the State of Kentucky (Kentucky 1979), and the American Institute for Character Education reports the use of its curriculum materials in thousands of classrooms across the country (Goble and Brooks 1983). California, too, has a variety of programs in place (California School Boards Association 1982; Los Angeles City Schools 1979; Solomon et al. 1985). And there are many smaller-scale projects underway, also, such as Donnan's efforts to encourage altruism and eliminate wastefulness in one school in Weybridge, Vermont (1985/1986).

So there exists a wide array of attempts to foster moral values directly. These plans generally meet with almost universal approval from teachers and students who participate. Positive results are often reported, in terms of improved school behavior, general social behavior, and academic achievement (Callihan and Frazee 1979; Solomon et al. 1986; Thomas Jefferson Research Center 1986).

At the same time, it is necessary to be skeptical of whether these various programs actually produce positive results and whether they precipitate improvements in character, for several reasons. First, the observers may be favorably biased with respect to their perceptions of the program and its power to produce changes in student behavior. For example, in a study of the use of the AICE materials in Dade County, Florida schools, no effect was produced in the experimental group despite the participants' enthusiasm for the program (Greenberg and Fain

1981). Second, alternative explanations for actual positive results are possible. Teacher and student enthusiasm for anything new, for example, might produce temporary positive effects. Or it may be that the opportunity to discuss moral issues, regardless of specific content or curricular material, has an effect. And third, even if the immediate effects are positive and caused by the particular features of the program, this may be simply a function of a positive response to an environmental condition, rather than the sign of something's becoming ingrained in someone's character. If so, the effect could vanish some time after the environmental conditions are altered.

Similar issues arise with regard to the importance of the normal curricular materials when they are presented with an eye toward teaching character. Some suggest that literature and history texts could be selected and taught in such a way as to serve the dual purpose of instructing students in the subjects and providing a moral lesson. The merit of this strategy is to provide for moral education in a way that does not sacrifice time devoted to the normal academic subjects. Certainly many people are concerned about the effects of school texts on students: current legal battles in Alabama and Tennessee, and the analysis of the anti-religion bias in commonly used textbooks (Davis Jr. et al. 1986; Vitz et al. 1985), reflect the concern that what students read in school has an impact on their moral beliefs. But has it been shown that differences in textbook prejudices produce differences in the moral beliefs of the children who read them?

A school is more than the content of its curriculum, and this reality is probably crucial to the moral education acquired by its students. What is sometimes called the "hidden" or implicit curriculum refers to patterns of interaction between the people within the school milieu and what those people learn from it. How teachers and students act towards one another, and how their activity is organized and coordinated in the school, may have a great effect on the development of character. If there is any truth to the Aristotelian adage that virtue is learned through practice, then students will learn about character in the social interaction of daily school life. Warnock argues that teaching morality as a subject is likely to produce skepticism amongst students, while real teaching is best accomplished by the example of a practical commitment to a particular ethic on the part of the teacher, "... in the playground, and in the classroom, and in the dinner queue ..." (1977 p. 141). If Warnock's view is correct, then what people actually do in school, not what they say, primarily affects moral education. (That is not to say, of course, that teachers should neglect to offer appropriate explanations of their actions at appropriate times.)

Of course this means that the object of investigation is enormously complex, making it difficult to isolate precisely what it is about a particular school experience that cultivates the growth of character in students. Research suggests that different kinds of schools are related to different values and elements of moral behavior, as well as academic achievement (Coleman et al. 1982; Grant 1981; 1983; 1985; Rutter et al. 1979; Swidler 1979), but precisely how this transpires, and which

phenomenon leads to which other, deserves more refined study.

It is plausible to argue that the ethos of a good school is a function of an entire constellation of elements, which produce their effect through their combined operation. If so, then attempts to isolate single effective factors within such school climates will be fruitless, and the quality of the school will have to be understood as a whole.

It is important here to recall the distinction between socialization's effect on character and the education of character properly speaking. No doubt the idea of the cultural atmosphere of a school implies that some of its influences will go unnoticed by the individual student. And, of course, in America the student's presence in the school is compulsory. But insofar as the acquisition of character is a matter of education for the student, its development must be voluntary, that is, undertaken with the awareness that what is accepted could be rejected. This may be an important point of entry for research, for it implies that the student's understanding of the school is crucial to the effect of its climate on the student's learning of character.

The studies of schools generally acknowledge that factors outside of the school can also have a significant impact on the behavior of students in school and thereafter. Family life, socioeconomic status, participation in religious or social organizations, the nature of the local community, and general social and political features of the society at large, are all potential influences on the learning of character. More fine-grained analyses of these conditions may also be considered. Coleman, for example, has suggested that the presence of "intergenerational closure" (a term he uses to identify how well parents are able to coordinate their responses to their children and their children's friends) may be a crucial factor in upholding social and moral norms (1985). A school may achieve its own distinct identity, but this does not mean that we can safely ignore the conditions outside of it.

V. Politics and Education: Raising Class Consciousness?

One way society at large affects moral education in the schools is through deliberate public policy, e.g., attempts to implement character education programs in the schools. Evaluation of policy proposals depends on whether a society possesses the means to carry out a given policy and successfully justify the policy's goals. The natural suspicion regarding any policy decision is whether that decision serves the particular interest of any of the parties involved in illegitimate fashion, rather than serving a legitimate educational ideal. Since students themselves hold little institutionalized political power, they are more vulnerable to manipulation in the interests of other segments of society. As with any program in moral education, the implementation of character education must be reviewed for its political implications.

Most of this discussion has been concerned with questions about

what character is and how it can be learned, the answers to which will determine the effectiveness of the means for character education policy recommendations. And with this in mind, one cautionary note must be added here: educational reform in the name of character was attempted in the first three decades of this century, utilizing strategies similar to those presently being considered (Pietig 1977). Apparently, they achieved little success, although this, too, is debatable. In any case, advocates of character education will find it hard to justify major efforts at educational reform until they can offer some reasonable prospect of achieving some measure of success.

Assuming that effective means are discovered, the effects on the various interest groups must be considered, along with the legitimacy of seeking those effects. Most directly, teachers and the intellectual class may be helped by a moral education program that encourages the formation of character. Besides easing the daily lives of the teachers whose students value obedience, the allegiance to academic achievement that such programs would produce could also improve their lot. As children come to value wisdom more and more by training in an activity devoted to the pursuit of it, their estimation of the purveyors of such wisdom would increase. Eventually, competition to become teachers and scholars could increase, as well as the social prestige attached to the profession.

Even if teachers do teach children to value the activity they themselves have devoted their professional lives to, this by itself is by no means necessarily illegitimate. It might be an important step toward successful individual career achievement in society. If education as a social practice prepares people for the kinds of vocational roles required by the society, then changes in schooling may well reflect changes in the composition of the work force (Swidler 1979). The devotion to knowledge may reflect an increase in the technocratic class of people who serve society through the use of their expertise, and the attention to character may reflect the ways in which the professional roles typical of this class require greater internalized restraints on behavior because these people cannot be supervised closely.

Beyond that, there is the oft-repeated claim that learning or wisdom is an essential element of any meaningful human life, and so students really ought to value their education highly. (That claim, of course, depends on whether the curriculum in fact provides meaningful knowledge, but that is the subject for another discussion.) If the school's goal is the acquisition of truly valuable knowledge, and the virtues of character are acquired through practice and from role models, it is understandable that any school's ethos will be prejudiced in favor of the virtue of wisdom, and rightly so.

Since advocates of character education see it as a partial solution to problems in society at large, one must also wonder whether the call for character education is an attempt to foist a problem shared by everyone onto the young in particular. Perhaps the present emphasis on character is a function of increases in mothers' entry into the

workforce, which in turn increases the need to internalize restraints on behavior among latchkey youngsters. Or perhaps the allegedly violent, hedonistic and meaningless qualities of contemporary American life indicate that many American adults lack character, which they regret somehow and seek to rectify in their children. If the latter is true, then unless teachers are pre-eminent paragons of virtue, efforts to encourage character formation are unlikely to succeed on a widespread basis. This would be a classic case of the bootstrap problem: if, following Aristotle, character is transmitted largely through role modeling, and the teachers of today did not have the benefit of a character education program or simply lack outstanding virtue, then the students of today will lack adequate role models to follow. It will be difficult for the adults to rescue the children from moral disorder without rescuing themselves at the same time, or before.

Then there is the problem of popular tyranny, that is, of confusing values that are genuine virtues of character with the popular conventional prejudices of the day, and making the latter the content of the moral education program. To the degree that a character education program reflects moral convictions which are enjoying a merely temporary popularity--or even consensual support--then even an effective program will become obsolete as soon as the social mood swings once more. And if those convictions are not clearly distinguished from any genuine virtues, the whole lot may be discarded in the next movement of moral educational reform. Unfortunately, popular opinion can be both fickle and indiscriminating, with the result that when the faddish elements of a reform in moral education are abandoned, so are its authentically good constituents. To avoid repeatedly reverting to the beginning in moral education, the good elements of previous efforts need to be preserved. Indeed, J.S. Mill argued that character is the best means available for resisting the shifting dictates of tyrannical custom in a modern democratic society, because of character's deep-seated constancy (Mill 1978).

In all of this, it is important to notice that there is no "safe" ground for moral education to stand on. Profriedt argues that even the protestation of neutrality can be used by the ruling elite to preserve their political hegemony in the face of opposition from people who reject the current vision of what is knowable and what must remain in the sphere of private opinion (1985). By viewing disagreement about moral values as incapable of rational resolution, the moral ideology of the controlling class or the interests of the state can be protected from critical scrutiny. (In America, religious tenets have often received this kind of treatment, as the following section indicates.) No position regarding moral education in schools is invulnerable to the charge that it constitutes a de facto program for the cultivation of certain values, and if that charge is true, then the self-described neutral position is actually indoctrinative, because it falsely pretends to have no moral agenda.

VI. Religion, Toleration, and Relativism

History offers a useful perspective on the controversy over the teaching of religion in school, since the issue in this country is as old as the country itself. The men who initiated the American order, and wrote the famous First Amendment, recognized the question of how religion should be treated in school, and the tradition of American thought here deserves attention.

This is not to say that the Founding Fathers cannot be wrong, nor that their wisdom cannot have become obsolete. But they must not be ignored. At the very least, the pragmatic value of considering the tradition of American thought concerning the relationship between education, religion, and the state makes such consideration worthwhile. Any American educational theorist is undoubtedly influenced by that tradition, even in the act of constructing critical alternatives to it. And any movement for educational reform in America will certainly face challenges from an audience claiming loyalty to that tradition. If the tradition is philosophically sound, it will act as a valuable guide for future thinking. If it is not, its inadequacies need to be exposed. In either case, confronting that tradition is likely to produce improvement. After all, the whole enterprise of institutionalized education rests on the premise that trying to learn things entirely on one's own is not the best route to knowledge.

The history of civilization immediately demonstrates the absurdity of omitting all mention of religion from educational practice. The failure to consider the influence of religious ideas and religiously motivated events simply distorts history, and so the demands of truth in education require the presentation of the role of religion in history. It may be difficult to present an unbiased account of whether the religious opinions of persons in history were true or false, but that they did in fact believe and act upon them is indisputable, and should be known. The more difficult questions concern the role of religious beliefs and practices of student and teacher themselves.

John Locke, the English political theorist whose writings had an important influence on the thinking of the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, argued against government control of religious beliefs on grounds relevant to character. The commonwealth's concern for civil interests entitles it to regulate behavior, but not the beliefs of the soul. This is because the salvation of the soul depends on the individual soul's being persuaded to accept certain beliefs, rather than being forced to, and because human understanding cannot judge the veracity of religious tenets with the same certitude as it can know the value of preserving the civil interests of life, liberty, and property (1966).

This view has two important implications relevant to character education. Character education emphasizes behavior, and Locke's view suggests that there is greater consensus on the rational evaluation of actions than there is on people's beliefs. Thus, even though people may disagree about the proper justification for an action, they are more

likely to agree about the propriety of the action itself. To the extent that character education is learned through and oriented toward right conduct, it should enjoy a broader consensus regarding its identification of what is right than will the more intellectually oriented forms of moral education.

On the other hand, character is something that almost always exhibits itself, and thus defies the neat segregation of public and private life that Locke's position implies. The person whose regular participation in religious activities has fixed specific attitudes on his or her character will display those attitudes in public life as well as in private. On the basis of the previous point, one can argue that such a person's behavior will meet with widespread approval. But if being a role model involves not only acting in a certain way but also explaining the reasons for that action, then the more controversial aspects of that person's character will begin to enter the picture at the edges. And if the possession of character is desirable, acquired through regular practice, and imbued with religious aspirations, then the student or teacher cannot be expected to leave his or her character outside of the schoolhouse door, either. This re-introduces the possibility of conflict based on religious differences, differences between religious and secular perspectives, and differences among secular ethical perspectives, which suggests that even if religion could be kept apart, the fundamental problem of ethics in a pluralistic society would remain.

The history of education in the United States plainly shows that religious and moral instruction have played a major part in the common schools, and that sectarian forces have produced significant conflict over the teaching of specific religious views (Cremin 1980; Johnson 1982; Smith 1967; Tyack 1966). Here again, the issue is partly whether the sectarian views are relatively superficial, and the consensus is substantial enough to overcome the sectarian tensions.

Many of the Founding Fathers plainly held that religious beliefs would determine many people's actions in the public sphere, and saw religiously informed moral education as an appropriate part of schooling. And part of the rationale for the new secular order was that it would enable people to actively practice their various religions without running afoul of the law. So it would be strange to embrace the opposite effect as fundamentally American, i.e., of prohibiting the appearance of religion in the daily lives of people in public schools. Bennett, following a Jeffersonian line of thinking, has argued that all religions, practically speaking, share a set of moral values in common, which no morally decent nonbeliever would reject, either (1986a). Values springing from a religious spirit can be taught, he suggests, without offending sectarian belief systems. This position is congruent with the common-core-of-values view mentioned in section II, adding a religious dimension to it.

But it is also important to account for the need for the First Amendment in the first place, and to acknowledge the pluralism that the American commitment to religious liberty implies. The right to believe

and practice one's own conception of the good is coupled with the willingness to tolerate the exercise of the same right by others, which implies the potential for fundamentally rival views. The principle of toleration requires people to act toward one another in a manner that avoids both repressive authoritarianism and indifferent relativism. How do we preserve standards of right and wrong without being compelled to demand that others obey those standards? Imposing them seems authoritarian, while neglecting to do so seems to tacitly endorse a relativistic acceptance of everyone's sincerely held beliefs, no matter what the content. Neither seems ethical.

One could adopt Locke's position and argue that persuasion is the only appropriate means for changing someone's religious and moral convictions, while force is only legitimate when someone's actions interfere with another's liberty. But that position makes the liberal assumption that pursuing the good is an individual project, in which others can only participate via non-interference. If a meaningful life can only be pursued within a particular kind of community or collective endeavor, the device of tolerant persuasion may mean failure, particularly if the appreciation of the value of that endeavor requires prior initiation or training, as the Aristotelian theory of character formation implies.

The classroom situation exacerbates this problem, particularly in the public school context. The teacher's character cannot reflect the plurality of views with equal commitment, and the immaturity of the student's character makes it difficult to maintain an alternative vision of good character without support from somewhere. Here, perhaps, is an illustration of the hypothesis that the interaction of variables may be crucial to the student's moral life in school. If parents, or other teachers, or the peer group, effectively reflect the plurality of legitimate character types in society, then learning from a teacher with a different form of character may be a positive experience. Warnock argues that it is more important that the teacher display some sort of character to serve as a model (rather than holding back in the interests of pure neutrality), and that the student will discover the plurality of character models in society soon enough to take them into consideration and choose the best (1977).

Here it is important to recall another part of Warnock's view: the tendency to attempt to resolve social issues through educational reform is appropriate, at least in the sense that discussion about the goals of education inevitably reflects people's understanding of what it means to live the good life. And there are legitimate rival views about this, views which ought to be heard before they are rejected. To silence the discussion will mean that educational decisions that affect the moral quality of people's lives will still be made, but without the benefit of consideration in what may be the best available forum for the intelligent examination of the relevant arguments. Such silence would imply the false and dangerous presumption that there is nothing left to learn or say about moral education.

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